

Max Anders had known this day would come. He was not a stupid man: he had built Medhall into a pharmaceutical powerhouse by his own hand, after all. He had not expected it to come so quickly, but the controversy of what was now being called Wolf Day had clearly piqued the interest of his now-former patrons in Gessellschaft. Of course, they were unaware of their change in status even now.

Contrary to a belief he liked to cultivate, Max could manifest metal from any flat and solid surface. The effort required varied depending on the base substance, and metal bloomed most easily from other metal. By keeping to manifesting from metal whenever he could, he perpetuated the belief that he needed metal to fight – meaning, in a life-or-death situation, he had a trump card. In this case, however, it was simply less tedious to sprout metal from his letter opener and envelop himself for the video call.

The oberst assigned to him, a masked and helmeted man whose name Anders was not permitted to know (he privately suspected that they swapped out routinely and this was all theater), appeared on-screen. Through the armored mask, he spoke in German. “<Anders, we have been awaiting your report, and yet received nothing. Fleischer tells us about a planned relocation in the wake of these catastrophic events. How will you manage your corporation from a new city? Such an upheaval, synchronized with the exodus of Empire 88, will surely draw the public eye and lead to theories. And an exposed pawn, in a nation not yet subservient, is of far less use.>”

A condescending sneer hidden behind his own full-face mask as a crown of blades adorned his head, Kaiser made no outward gestures or movements. “That is because I will not be relocating,” he replied in English. “You’re entirely correct in that Medhall moving would draw far too much attention and easily allow connection between myself and the Empire.”

“<And how do you plan to coordinate the Empire’s operations? Will you take day trips to fly the colors in your organization’s new home? It will still draw attention.>” The oberst did not yet make mention of Kaiser’s speaking in English, though he certainly noted its strangeness.

“You misunderstand,” Kaiser replied. “I will not be relocating because I will no longer be part of the Empire.” He raised his voice to speak over the oberst’s incredulous interrogative. “I built this corporation with my bare hands, raised it from my father’s hobby into an industrial giant. I inherited the Empire and expected that it would be yet another path to power, but it has only been a millstone around my neck. You lack the power to affect real change here, and maintaining the Empire as a gang even after the departure of the Teeth and the fall of the Marquis has led to a lack of public relations. We controlled much of the city, yes, but *as a gang*. Not as a legitimate force recognized by the people.” He paused to take a breath. “In short, effective immediately, I quit.”

“You do not quit from your association with the Gessellschaft, Maximilian,” the oberst replied in English with surprisingly little accent.

Kaiser spread his arms. “Then come and punish me. Send shiploads of men and watch Bloodmoon slaughter them all. It is no longer profitable, monetarily or in terms of authority, to be a villain in Brockton Bay.”

“It is far less profitable still to abandon the Gessellschaft, Max Anders.”

The oberst’s threat was clear, however Max had already planned for that contingency, should it come down to it. Once the feed was cut, Max sprouted metal poles between his armor’s plates to pry it open

and let him step out, then shoved the pile into a secure closet where it could dissolve as it always did after a day or so.

Max pulled out his personal phone and dialed a familiar number. It would sting, letting her get away, but perhaps he could win her back properly once they'd started a new chapter in their lives.

(BREAK)

“So what do we know?” Doctor Mother asked the assembled members. She had gone by that name for so long that she found herself more and more often forgetting her birth name, Amélie.

“Much less than any of us would like,” Kurt replied. The Number Man never sat during these meetings, feeling that it made him vulnerable. His attire was, as always, aggressively normal – the kind of clothing a corporate assistant-manager would wear, and well below what he could afford to purchase. “If we take Bloodmoon and her associates at their word, however, some things make far more sense even if it means we know even less.”

“Hasn't Armsmaster been working on a lie-detector program?” Dominic interjected. Legend took off his mask for these meetings. While he knew there were almost certainly things they were hiding from him, the Cauldron organization still contained some of his closest friends. He wanted to trust them. “We have the footage: we could run it through?”

“Already tried,” Rebecca replied, smooth and even a little tired-sounding. “The software is still in its early stages. It doesn't always get things right, and especially has trouble with less-human capes. Specifically, it registered Bloodmoon and the others as being non-human.” Alexandria let that hang in the air.

“Then can we rely on our one-eyed, one-horned, flying brick and people-reader?” That line, from David of all people, got everyone's attention. They'd used that awful phrase-pun on occasion ever since Hero's death, in the morbid dark-humor manner that soldiers often did, but David was never the kind of person to make jokes unless he was on one end of the scale: extremely comfortable and confident, or utterly terrified. And with another S-class threat that none of them understood, it didn't take a powers-enhanced cold-reader to know which he was at the moment.

Said one-eyed people-reader, Rebecca, shook her head. “Only Bloodmoon's associates, and even then I wouldn't claim my interpretations should hold up in court. Owl is probably the easiest for me to read, but also gives the least away if that makes sense. The men, though? Their behavior is odd, and their bodies have to have been altered in some way: things like microexpressions and twitches don't line up with really any of the human baselines.”

“And Bloodmoon herself?” Doctor Mother asked.

“Worse than any of them. Looking at any of them for extended periods gives me a headache, and that's an awful sensation for someone who's no longer used to pain.” Rebecca reflexively touched the corner of her missing eye. But Bloodmoon? Just looking at her makes my fight-or-flight instincts go berserk, and scream for me to run away. It took a lot of meditation just to observe her, and nothing about her makes sense. Her expressions, behaviors and body language change with disturbing speed and frequency.” She sighed. “If you told me Bloodmoon was actually being remote-puppeted by five

different people who each had a slightly different idea of how to react to any given situation, I'd probably believe you."

All eyes turned to Fortuna, who still hadn't spoken up. At length the pale woman finally made a sound, speaking in broken English. Whenever Fortuna didn't or couldn't rely on her power, the cracks in the child-soldier's facade became immediately apparent: so much that she had accomplished relied on the Paths that, without them, she could barely articulate. "Is strange. Not Zion. I know. Not human. Something else. Maybe God. Feels..." She used a term from her homeland, one that only Amélie and Rebecca knew. "Not sure how say."

Doctor Mother helpfully interjected. "It feels divine, though Fortuna's people believed in a pantheon. Simply being divine does not mean good or benevolent." She paused. "You also said 'maybe God'. As in the singular God?"

Fortuna nodded. "Yes. Divine. Greater, though. Gods can die, yes? Gods die, God comes. This...this is same: gods die, God comes. Wolves were wrong. Real...real..." She broke off into her mother tongue, going too quickly for even Doctor Mother to follow.

Rebecca was forced to translate. "I- Slow down, Fortuna! I might have an eidetic memory but I don't have an eidetic mouth!" She took another breath. "It doesn't translate directly: her people had a lot of ephemeral concepts, but that's why she's talking in her language. 'The Moon wants us to fall into it.' 'The Black Mother wants her lost child, the child is not hers.'" She spared a glance at Amélie, the black Doctor Mother just as confused as everyone else. "Ah, 'The Doll guards. She will die for...' it. She's not giving me anything more specific as to what 'it' is. 'The Hunter' - and I can hear the capitalization there - 'will save or damn us.' Is that everything? Alright then."

Fortuna nodded. "Head hurts. I... I...wonder? No, not wonder. I wonder agent screaming."

It was Dominic who picked up on it first, while Rebecca was still mulling over the implications of Fortuna's translated babble. "Wait, you think your agent, your power, is screaming?"

"Was. When saw, when thought. Ah! Not wonder: think!" She took a moment to be proud of herself. "Now sleeps. Why I bad talk."

"...Well, shit," David gave voice to the rest of the group's feelings. "You didn't burn it out, did you?"

She shook her head. "No. Sleeps."

Doctor Mother let out a soft, long exhalation. "Well, that would line up with Tattletale's interpretation that Thinkers put themselves in danger when focusing on Bloodmoon. We're lucky it didn't burn out and only needs to recuperate. Why did you take such a risk?"

Fortuna opted to reply in her native language again. "<I could not prevent myself. Something compelled me to see, to know.>"

"Unsettling," the Doctor responded. "And speaking of powers, Rebecca, have you noticed the same with the Bloodmoon and Wolf Day AARs?"

"Don't leave me out of this," Dominic interjected. "I lived it."

“True enough,” Amélie nodded while Rebecca responded in the affirmative. “We’ve noticed that vial-based capes, even non-Thinkers, are harmed more by Bloodmoon’s presence and powers.”

“The first notice of this was with Assault and Battery,” Rebecca picked up from the Doctor. “When Bloodmoon restored her arm, Assault was struck with vertigo and vomited, while Battery nearly went catatonic while screaming like an air-raid siren.”

“Same thing happened when the crystal moon came out,” Dominic continued, shuddering. “I can’t remember anything that I saw or experienced, just that it was terrifying. I...the closest thing I can liken it to is if you know *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, there’s a sequel where they have a device that breaks people’s minds by showing them the entirety of the universe and then a tiny little dot that says ‘You Are Here’. It was like that, being shown some incomprehensible truth which I must have blocked out or just couldn’t understand.”

“The way you say that,” Doctor Mother murmured. “The ‘crystal moon’... Kurt, do we have any stills of that?” Number Man pulled up some shots of a blood-red moon looking almost like an orb of claret, then one of the clouds parting to reveal the moon now glittering and opalescent, like a sphere of carven crystal.

Dominic yelped and clamped his eyes shut the moment he realized what was about to happen. David made a keening noise and fell over, clutching his face through his hood. Rebecca vomited and passed out off her chair, leading Doctor Mother to make sure she didn’t drown in her own retch.

Fortuna and Kurt stared in awe at the image.

(BREAK)

Sophia had been acting weirder than usual, now being friendly with a girl uglier than Taylor. This was somehow Greg’s fault. He’d done something, gotten to Sophia and messed with her brain. Maybe he was a cape, setting things up for some bizarre little fanfiction. That could be why Taylor was suddenly a badass: he was programming her! It’s not like Taylor could be strong on her own.

The plan was simple, but uncomplicated was the best way to go. The gun belonged to Taylor’s mom. Taylor didn’t use her locker anymore, so it was easy enough to learn how to reset the combination on a shitty school locker. Emma would get rid of Greg, then hide the gun in Taylor’s locker and report that she’d seen the girl acting shifty. She’d get her friend back and Taylor would be punished. All would be right with the world!

---

I watched Emma slink through the halls, the pistol burning a hole in her purse. It was about damn time that she did something. I was beginning to think all my provocations would have been for naught, and then I’d feel like a tool for having put so much time into setting up these dominos...